

THE GLOBE AND MAIL

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HD **What is COP26? A guide to the Glasgow climate talks – the world’s most consequential environment conference; Who is attending the COP26 climate conference in Glasgow next week? What are the main goals at this year’s conference? All that and more in our explainer ahead of the UN’s climate change summit**

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Stark evidence of climate change piled up this year as the world suffered deadly heat waves, wildfires, droughts, floods and storms.

Scientists warn that this kind of destruction could become even more frequent over the next several decades, displacing people from their homes and pressuring economies, unless countries take drastic action to curb greenhouse gas emissions.

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That’s why so much attention is being focused on COP26, the United Nations Climate Change Conference in Glasgow, Scotland, where leaders of more than 190 countries will attempt to come to an agreement on the next steps for transitioning to a low-carbon economy. Expectations are high that the talks will yield concrete plans for meeting a target of net-zero emissions by 2050.

There are many subplots. Among them the role of the world’s second-largest emitter, the United States, as it rejoins the international fold under President Joe Biden after his predecessor’s reneging on commitments made in Paris in 2015. And an apparent no-show by Chinese President Xi Jinping has many wondering if the summit’s goals can be achieved without emitter No. 1.

Underlying the proceedings is the surging cost of energy as economies recover from the devastation of the pandemic and demand for fossil fuels outstrips supply. It is raising questions about the overall costs of an energy transition. “The decarbonization of our society requires a total economic, social and environmental transformation,” said Tamara Krawchenko, an assistant professor at the University of Victoria’s School of Public Administration. “How are we going to manage a just transition? This is the sticking point.”

As world leaders gear up for COP26, The Globe and Mail sets out what you need to know about the conference the UN has billed as “the world’s best last chance to get runaway climate change under control.”

What is COP26?

COP26 refers to the 26th annual UN Conference of the Parties, which first met in Berlin in 1995 (due to the pandemic, there was no meeting last year). The COP is the main decision-making body of the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), an agreement between 197 signatories to “stabilize greenhouse gas concentrations at a level that would prevent dangerous anthropogenic (human-induced)

interference with the climate system.” The parties include 196 countries and the European Union. COP26 is being hosted by the United Kingdom and will take place from Oct. 31 to Nov. 12 in Glasgow.

What, exactly, happens at a COP?

A COP is a forum for countries to engage in negotiations and debates about global progress on reducing emissions and plans to limit climate change. A critical aspect of the summit is a review of the contributions of each of the parties, including as it relates to annual emissions inventories.

Over the first two days, leaders will make statements regarding the actions they are taking domestically and internationally. Each remaining day of the two-week program is organized around themes, with this year’s agenda focusing on topics such as finance, energy transitions, nature, adaptation and clean transport. Events involving delegates and observers accredited by the UNFCCC will take place at the Blue Zone, which is managed by the UN and located at the Scottish Events Campus.

While the general public can’t access the Blue Zone, the British government is preparing a Green Zone at the Glasgow Science Centre. It will be open to youth groups, civil society, academia, artists and businesses and will feature events, exhibitions, cultural performances, talks and workshops.

What is the Paris Agreement and the Paris Rulebook?

In late 2015, 195 parties signed on to a new climate deal called the Paris Agreement. The first-of-its-kind, the legally binding international treaty was adopted at COP21 in the French capital and came into force in 2016. Its stated goal is to “hold the increase in the global average temperature to well below 2 degrees above pre-industrial levels and pursuing efforts to limit the temperature increase to 1.5 degrees above pre-industrial levels.” Under the agreement, developed countries agreed to make US\$100-billion in public and private money available annually for climate finance by 2020 – a target that was not reached.

The Paris Agreement requires that each signatory prepare, communicate and maintain a plan to reduce national emissions and adapt to the impacts of climate change. These plans, known as nationally determined contributions (NDCs), must be updated every five years. Because last year’s COP was cancelled, this is the first year that countries will present their revised emissions targets. In the lead-up to the conference, some countries have already increased their pledges. Canada, for example, initially committed to reducing emissions to 30 per cent below 2005 levels by 2030, but earlier this year, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau upped the target to at least 40 per cent.

“Everybody is looking to this year to see if the parties are working to increase their ambitions,” said University of British Columbia political science professor Kathryn Harrison, who will be attending COP26 as an observer. “Time is running out, especially for the Paris Agreement ideal of limiting warming to 1.5 degrees.” As the UN has put it, Paris set the destination, and Glasgow must make it a reality.

The Paris Rulebook, which was adopted in 2018 at COP24 in Poland, outlines the rules and procedures for implementing the Paris Agreement, including as it relates to governance, transparency, finance, compliance and the periodic global stocktake – an assessment of the world’s collective progress toward achieving the Paris targets. The first global stocktake will take place from 2021 to 2023, then repeat every five years. While much was hashed out in Poland, the parties weren’t able to agree on rules for implementing Article 6, which covers international carbon markets. Leaders in Glasgow will try to finalize the rules around carbon markets, including as they relate to preventing double counting, in which both the purchaser and the seller of emissions credits claim the reductions as part of their progress toward achieving their NDCs. “Weak Article 6 rules could gut the Paris Agreement,” Prof. Harrison said. “There’s a lot at stake.”

Who will be there? Who won’t?

More than 25,000 people are expected to descend upon Glasgow for the event, including politicians, diplomats, negotiators, observers, youth groups and business leaders such as Mark Carney, a former governor of the Bank of Canada and Bank of England. [The Queen](#) has “regretfully decided” not to attend the conference after she was advised to rest. Swedish activist Greta Thunberg is set to attend the conference.

More than 100 world leaders are slated to attend. Perhaps the most notable among them is U.S. President Joe Biden, who recommitted to the Paris Agreement after his predecessor, Donald Trump, pulled the country out while rolling back pollution limits from power plants, oil and gas producers and cars and trucks. In another positive sign, Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison, who has so far resisted imposing tough

emission targets at home, said this month that he would attend the meeting. The EU negotiates as a bloc at COP summits and will be represented by European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen.

At the same time, China's President is said to be unlikely to attend – possibly over concerns for his security. (Chinese climate envoy Xie Zhenhua, however, is expected to be there). His country is grappling with rolling blackouts and a coal shortage that have forced factories to close and citizens to worry about keeping the lights on and heating their homes as winter approaches.

China emits as much as 28 per cent of the world's greenhouse gases, almost double the United States' share, and Mr. Xi has been keen to show his country is serious about fighting climate change. Beijing aims to achieve carbon neutrality before 2060, and a major part of that commitment includes cutting coal-fired generation to 5 per cent of electricity supplies from 60 per cent. Still, China is unlikely to agree to tougher emission targets, given its already daunting challenge on the energy front, said Gordon Houlden, director emeritus of the University of Alberta's China Institute and a former diplomat posted to China.

What's significant about COP26?

All eyes are on Mr. Biden. The U.S. President made fighting climate change a big part of his 2020 election campaign and has pledged to cut U.S. emissions to 50 per cent below 2005 levels by 2030. His administration is proposing the largest-ever U.S. investment in fighting climate change, including mandating that a sizable portion of electricity come from emission-free sources and penalizing utilities that do not meet clean-energy standards.

That's controversial, even among some Democrats, and the legislative plans could be left unfinished by the time COP26 begins, as budget negotiations drag on in the Senate. There is still hope for the administration's climate plan, but officials have said Mr. Biden could travel to Glasgow with an alternative plan under executive action that allows him to play the role of influencer in convincing other countries to take tough action.

The world's financial sector is set to play a major role in the discussions, as its decisions about capital allocation – investing, lending – will influence which industries will be forced to slash emissions and exit high-carbon activities and which ones will be well-funded for expansion amid the energy transition.

The sector is not yet close to meeting the necessary targets. In fact, less than 0.5 per cent of global fund assets are currently aligned with the Paris ambition of keeping the global temperature rise to well below 2 C, according to CDP, formerly the Carbon Disclosure Project.

All of this will be hashed out against a backdrop of landmark research demonstrating the urgent need to get to net zero but also highlighting the massive structural changes to global economies that will be necessary. This summer, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) issued [its starkest report yet](#), concluding that global warming affects every part of the world and that there's no longer any doubt that humans are contributing to temperature increases. The strongly worded, monolithic report was described by UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres as a "code red for humanity."

Rising sea levels and disappearing Arctic ice have been slow-moving disasters, and many of the effects have become irreparable, the team of researchers said. Many people are struggling with the impact of severe weather today; the intense heat waves and storms of 2021 put that all in sharp relief.

The IPCC report put an exclamation point on another major study, this one by the International Energy Agency. The IEA said in a "road map" to net zero that pledges by governments to date, even if fully achieved, will fall well short of what is needed. The organization, which serves as the West's energy watchdog, said investment in new oil and gas developments must stop, 90 per cent of electricity should be from renewable sources by 2050 and governments must "close the gap between rhetoric and action."

Meanwhile, a surge in oil, natural gas and coal prices has fuelled criticism about the transition to green energy, as some consumers face the prospect of a costly winter. A massive drop in spending by energy companies during the pandemic created a supply crunch, and the energy transition is still in its early stages, so renewables are not yet able to fill the gap. That provides a taste of the massive investments needed to make the shift in a way that does not put whole populations at a disadvantage.

What are the main goals of this year's conference?

COP organizers have laid out four key goals for the event: secure global net zero by mid-century and keep the ideal of limiting global warming to 1.5 degrees within reach; adapt to protect communities and natural habitats; work together to finalize the Paris Rulebook and accelerate collaboration between governments, businesses and civil society; and mobilize the trillions in private and public sector finance required to achieve global net zero.

The latest IPCC report found that the global average temperature is now 1.1 degrees warmer than it was in pre-industrial times – a steep increase relative to anything in recorded history. It will likely exceed the 1.5 degree threshold in the next 20 years, which is somewhat sooner than previous estimates.

Countries are expected to update their 2030 emission targets ahead of the summit. The hope is that leaders will come forward with ambitious targets that align with the goal of keeping 1.5 alive. This will inevitably require accelerating the phase-out of coal, limiting deforestation and quickly transitioning to electric vehicles. Adaptation will also be top of mind, as talks are expected to focus on protecting and restoring ecosystems, as well as building resilient infrastructure.

In terms of mobilizing finance, Mr. Carney has led efforts to get banks, insurance companies and asset managers to place climate considerations alongside financial ones when making loan and investment decisions and to devote capital to funding the race to net zero. He led the creation of the Glasgow Financial Alliance for Net Zero, whose members account for US\$88-trillion in assets.

Mr. Carney, who is serving as the UN's special envoy on climate action and finance, has also championed standardized disclosure of climate impact and risk in all sectors to allow investors to make credible comparisons and direct their capital accordingly. That is one of the “deliverables” expected from the financial sector at COP26. The others include improving climate risk management, financial returns, “mobilizing” the capital to invest in new climate-friendly projects and encouraging new market structures and financial products.

What is Canada pledging for the summit?

Canada's climate-change plans are grounded in levying carbon taxes, supporting clean technology, accelerating the phase-out of coal-fired power and enacting legislation to formalize emission targets.

Canada is also among the growing number of countries pledging to reduce methane emissions, which are more damaging than carbon dioxide, to 30 per cent below 2020 levels by 2030. Ottawa has vowed to go further, promising to develop a plan to reduce oil and gas methane emissions to at least 75 per cent below 2012 levels by 2030.

Even with these ambitious commitments, “it's not plausible that Canada will come across as a white knight [at COP26], given our track record,” Prof. Harrison said. Canada has never come close to meeting its emission goals, and the country is one of the largest in among developed countries. “It's very hard for Canada's reputation to overnight recover from three decades of failure,” she said. “Our emissions are well above what they were in 1990 and at about the same level as 2005. We've made a lot of commitments, but our emissions have gone up or at best levelled off.”

Often referred to as the twin crisis of climate change is biodiversity loss. As the world warms, ecosystems are disrupted and species are threatened, reducing nature's ability to capture and store carbon released into the atmosphere. Ottawa has pledged to protect 25 per cent of Canada's land and 25 per cent of the country's oceans by 2025 and hit the 30-per-cent mark on both fronts by 2030. The federal government has specifically committed more than \$4-billion over 10 years for natural climate solutions, including planting two billion trees, conserving and restoring wetlands and supporting sustainable farming practices such as cover cropping and decreased use of nitrogen fertilizer. The government has also said it will invest in efforts to better quantify the contribution of natural ecosystems to the country's carbon budget and to ensure that the reductions are captured in national emissions reporting.

Globally, Canada is working to repair broken trust among poorer countries when it comes to providing them with the necessary climate financing. A few weeks ago, Environment Minister Jonathan Wilkinson and his German counterpart, Jochen Flasbarth, said they would help ensure rich economies make good on a commitment to provide US\$100-billion in annual funding to help developing countries cut emissions and prepare for already inescapable climate-change impacts. That total was supposed to have been reached by 2020, but donor countries are falling short. This has cast a pall over the proceedings.

How has the pandemic affected plans for the conference?

The summit is taking place with the pandemic entering its 20th month, and there are a series of rules that delegates must follow. Everyone must present a negative test result when they arrive and participate in a daily testing program. Delegates from a red-list country must quarantine for 10 days before arriving in England or Scotland – unless they are fully vaccinated, in which case the quarantine period is five days.

The inequity in global vaccine distribution has put pressure on delegates from poorer countries. Britain has said it will foot the bill for all required quarantine periods for delegates and other attendees from developing countries who would otherwise find it difficult to attend the proceedings. It will also make vaccines available to delegates who would not otherwise have access to them.

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